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Date: MARCH 8, 1990
Edition:

AUSTIN - AMERICAN-STATESMAN

The FARENTHOLD LOOKS ASKANCE
AT CURRENT GUBERNATORIAL
CAMPAIGN

Character:

or
Classification:

Submitting Office:

AUSTIN RA

Indexing:

Thursday, March 8, 1990

Austin American-Statesman

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The American-Statesman will select letters on the basis of readership interest and relevance to current events. Letters should be 200 or fewer words, although there may be exceptions. Letters should focus on one issue and not be too personal. Letters must carry a name, complete mailing address and daytime telephone number. Letter writers may appear once per 30 days. We reserve the right to edit all letters. Address letters to Letters to the Editor, American-Statesman, P.O. Box 670, Austin, Texas 78767.

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OPINION

Farenthold looks askance at current gubernatorial campaigns

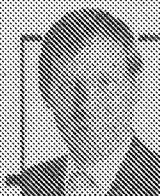
HOUSTON — A recent newspaper article referred to Ann Richards as the first woman to run a serious campaign for governor since Miriam "Ma" Ferguson in the 1930s. The writer missed Sissy Farenthold.

Frances Tarkenton "Sissy" Farenthold was a state representative from Corpus Christi, a lawyer and mother who served just two terms in the Texas House of Representatives before running as a progressive Democratic candidate for governor in the 1972 election.

She is alive and well in Houston, where she practices civil law. Now divorced, she lives in a well-appointed, high-rise apartment a few blocks from The Summit professional basketball arena.

Her hair, once long and black, is now short and white. But she looks a decade younger than her 63 years. And she still holds young opinions, and strongly. Much of her political passion in recent years has gone to arms control and trying to end military domination in El Salvador, supported by dollars from the U.S. government.

Farenthold is disappointed by this



Dave
McNeely

year's campaign for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination. She thinks it is cash-happy and consultant-driven, and relatively devoid of discussion of important issues like the environment.

"Here we are sinking in chemicals in this town," she said. She thinks candidates don't discuss the environment because it will cost them campaign cash, and because political reporters don't ask about it.

Even Richards, who put forth an environmental platform, hasn't pushed it on the stump, Farenthold said. Richards' campaign "has been one more of mood (rather than issues). I'm not running for office, but that was never what I thought politics was about."

She says that if issues aren't discussed during campaigns, they aren't part of the

governmental agenda.

"See, I just can't buy this thing — and I'm not speaking of her specifically. I'm speaking in a much more general way — and I know it's the conventional wisdom, which is let sleeping dogs lie, and then get in office, and then I'll get to the issues. I don't believe that.

"I think whatever things are before, they're more difficult once you're in office. . . . I know I'm isolated in thinking that, and maybe it's true you don't win elections that way. (But) when I see the level of debate, I'm really distressed by it."

She is particularly turned off by the Democrats shying away from gun control, and by the way Jim Mattox and Mark White "rush over each other on the death penalty." That applies especially to White, she said, who in a TV commercial walks past photos of men put to death while he was governor.

"I wonder what the families of those executed people must feel," she said. She observed that the United States and South Africa are the only Western nations that have the death penalty.

As you can see, Farenthold is not shy about expressing her opinion, and never has been. She was a member of the so-called "Dirty Thirty" ethics minority in the 160-member Texas House.

She and 29 other brave souls were the die-hards in 1971 who voted for a House investigation of charges by the Securities and Exchange Commission that then-House Speaker Gus Mutscher and others got quick-profit stock deals to help push legislation. Mutscher was later convicted for his role in what came to be called the Sharpsstown stock fraud scandal.

That scandal became the driving force in the 1972 elections. When it came time for a progressive candidate to protest the business-as-usual approach to government, Farenthold stepped forward. She did not win, but stirred things up with a strong issue-oriented campaign that rallied a large number of progressive voters.

In the first primary, she got 27.9 percent of the vote, running second to Dolph Briscoe, who had 43.9 percent. But Farenthold and Briscoe together

ended the political careers of then-Lt. Gov. Ben Barnes, who ran third with 17.9 percent, and then-Gov. Preston Smith, who had 8.7 percent.

Briscoe won the runoff, with 55.2 percent, and the general election.

At the Democratic National Convention that summer, Farenthold got national attention as the first woman put forth as a candidate for vice president. She didn't win.

Two years later, Farenthold ran for governor again. This time, she did not check with many of her supporters first, but simply threw her hat in the ring. Briscoe stomped on it. Farenthold got but 28.7 percent of the vote, as Briscoe coasted to victory in both the primary and general elections.

And that was it for Farenthold in elective politics. In 1976, she was named president of Wells College in Aurora, N.Y. She stayed in that post until 1980, and then returned to Texas, where she has quietly practiced law since then.

McNeely, an American-Statesman columnist, covers political issues affecting the state.

1836-519-Sub E-214

SEARCHED	INDEXED
SERIALIZED	FILED
MAR 9 1990	
FBI - SAN ANTONIO	

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